

NELL KAHULULANI CONANT PORTER

THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Nell Kahululani Conant Porter

(1895 - 1980)

Mrs. Alexander James Porter was born in Waimea, Kauai. Her father, Elmer Ellsworth Conant, was the manager of several different plantations before he became the manager of Parker Ranch for six years. After he left Parker Ranch, he retired in his fifties but was called out of retirement by George Cooke who wanted him to manage the Molokai Ranch. Mr. Conant accepted the position and in the 1920's was murdered, reportedly for enforcing a rule that prohibited deer hunting on the ranch. His murder was never solved.

In 1916, Nell Kahululani Conant married a young man from Liverpool, England whose father was a detective with the police department there. Alexander James Porter was en route to Singapore when his ship stopped at Honolulu. A friend persuaded him to remain and he accepted a job with Theo. H. Davies and Company, Limited. He worked for the firm for forty-two years, forty of them in Hilo, Hawaii where the Porters were a prominent family in the community.

Mrs. Porter recalls her family background and some of the major events of her life in an interesting manner and with clarity of thought.

Lynda Mair, Interviewer

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INTERVIEW WITH NELL KAHULULANI CONANT PORTER

(MRS. ALEXANDER JAMES PORTER)

At her Pohai Nani apartment, 45-090 Namoku Street, Kaneohe, 96744
August 18, 1971

P: Nell Kahululani C. Porter

M: Lynda Mair, Interviewer

M: (there is a background noise that sounds like a waterfall or a mechanical disturbance in the recorder) . . . As far back as you remember. For instance, where you were born and your parents--their names. Kind of start with that and then . . .

P: Yes. Do you want me to start with my parents or my grandparents?

M: Grandparents, preferably.

P: Well, he was an oldtimer of Kauai.

M: Your grandfather.

P: Um hmm. I have a picture of him.

M: Your grandfather was born here too.

P: No, that grandfather was born in Ohio.

M: And he came out here.

P: He came out here and that was my mother's father and he married a Hawaiian so my mother was half-Hawaiian.

M: Oh, I see. And what was your grandfather's name?

P: Neal. John Neal. And he settled in Koloa, Kauai.

M: Koloa? Okay. What was your grandmother's name?

P: Grandmother? His wife's name was a Hawaiian name.

Halieta--I never could say it--Nakapaahu. (Lynda laughs)
It's a well-known, old Hawaiian name. It's a hard one to
spell. Nakapaahu. [Halieta: Harriet]

M: Do you know how to spell it?

P: No, I don't. (Lynda laughs) Nakapaahu. Na-ka-pa-a-hu.
(she pronounces it syllabically)

M: Well, I'll take a stand. Na-ka-pa-a-hu. Paahu. There's
an "h" in there.

P: Yeh. And her name was Halieta.

M: And that was on Kauai?

P: That was on Kaua'i in Koloa.

M: Plantation.

P: No, he wasn't connected with the plantation. He had his
own business. He had a store and a mill and a lumberyard.
He was a cabinet maker and they had thirteen children.
(laughter) My mother was next to the oldest and when she
was eight years old she was raised by the Smith family,
the missionaries. Her mother put her in this missionary
home and she was raised by the Smith family in Koloa. My
mother was a very talented woman and you would never know
she had a speck of Hawaiian in her. She was so much above
her sisters because she lived in the house of missionar-
ies.

[The Reverend James William and Melicent Knapp Smith,
members of the Tenth Company, arrived at Honolulu on Sep-
tember 21, 1842 and were stationed at Koloa, Kauai in No-
vember 1842. Mrs. Smith established the Koloa Boarding
School for Girls in 1861 and maintained it for ten years.
The Smiths labored at Koloa the rest of their lives, he
as the only physician on the island, until he died there
in 1887 and she, in 1891. Missionary Album, 1820-1970.]

M: Well, she was raised, then, by the Smith family and then
what happened to her?

P: And then she married my father who was a young man that
came out from Memphis, New York and he was brought up by
his uncle, John Wright, an oldtimer, and my father was
just a young man about eighteen years old.

M: This uncle was Wright? W-R?

P: Uh huh. W-R-I-G-H-T. Old John Wright.

M: And he'd been here a long time.

P: Yes, and he was a manager at one of those plantations. The last time I think it was Kealia (actually, it sounds more like Kekalina but there is no plantation or place on Kauai with that name).

M: Here on this island?

P: No, no. Kaua'i. It was on Kaua'i. And he brought up his nephew, who was my father, and when he met my mother, who was a half-Hawaiian, he married her and my mother had eight children.

M: Wow! Big families. (chuckles)

P: Big families (laughs).

M: What was your father's name?

P: Conant. Elmer Ellsworth Conant. E. E. Conant.

M: Elmer?

P: Uh huh. Ellsworth.

M: Ellsworth. Can you spell that for me?

P: E-L-L-S-W-O-R-T-H. Conant.

M: C-O-N-

P: A-N-T.

M: I see. And your mother's name I didn't get.

P: Sue Ann. [Surreney Ann]

M: Sue Ann. Is that two separate words?

P: Yes.

M: Sue Ann Neal Conant. And what did your father do for a living?

P: My father was manager of the McBride Sugar Company, [Ltd.]. He was manager of the Waimea Sugar [Mill] Company [Ltd.] there on Kaua'i, as I remember as a child, and then we left the island of Kaua'i and came up to the Big Island of Hawai'i. And then he worked for James Castle. There was a Castle family and Mr. Castle and my father were quite

friendly and Mr. Castle had a tobacco farm up there and my father managed that for awhile. He had a tobacco farm and a coffee plantation and my father was put in charge of that and he worked for Mr. James Castle and a man by the name of Mr. McSuffolk (phonetic). Those are oldtime people. Then they abandoned those two corporations, if you call it that, and they started a sugar plantation on the Island of Hawai'i over in Kona.

M: What part of the island?

P: Kona. And my father was made manager of that.

M: What was the name of that plantation?

P: Kona Plantation Company. It wasn't a very big one and we lived there for awhile until that fell in. And then my father was offered a position over at the Parker Ranch--that big ranch on Hawai'i. You've heard of Parker Ranch. It was in the hands of the receivers. I don't know, there was a lot of quarreling between the Parkers so my father was made receiver of this big ranch until it was settled in the court and then he was made manager of the Parker Ranch and they lived there for about six years. And they lived in that big home that Mr. [Richard] Smart lives in now called Huapelu. (sound like a train going by)

M: Kuapelu.

P: Huapelu.

M: Huapelu. Wow! (in hushed tone)

P: As a child I remember--I was then about thirteen or fourteen--each one of us had our own horse and we used to ride all over that ranch. That was many years ago. After all, I'm seventy-eight years old (laughs) and I was only about twelve or thirteen.

Then my father either left the ranch and then retired --that's it. Then he came to Honolulu and they lived at the old Donna Hotel, if you happen to know where that is.

M: Donner?

P: Donna. The Donna Hotel. It was run by the McCarthy family and Mr. [Charles J.] McCarthy at one time was governor of Hawai'i. [1918-1921] Mr. and Mrs. McCarthy ran this hotel and my father and mother stayed there, lived there for quite awhile, and when I was married, my reception was given by Mrs. McCarthy at this hotel.

Mr. George Cooke of Moloka'i asked my father to be

manager of the Moloka'i Ranch so, he had retired but he decided maybe he would like to work again--he was in the mid-fifties--so he went up to Moloka'i and he was manager of Moloka'i Ranch for quite a spell and he was murdered.

M: My goodness.

P: Um hm. There was a rule. On the ranch, they had deer and people used to have permits to shoot the deer and use it for their own home consumption. Well, there was a couple of people there--a couple of families--and they resented the fact that Mr. Cooke told my father that these people were not to shoot on the ranch anymore because they were shooting the deer and selling them here in Honolulu. So my father took out this what-you-call-it and "No more shooting on the ranch" to these people and they resented that. And they feel that they are the ones who put this dynamite in my father's car and when he started it in the morning it blew up and killed him.

M: Wow! (shocked surprise)

P: E. E. Conant. That would be way back in 1920. In the 1920's. That was all over the Islands. Everybody knew about it.

M: It must have been a tremendous scandal.

P: Yes, it was a terrible thing. Well you know, then Mr. Cooke--George Cooke--had a detective come out from the mainland on a very important case, from a detective agency. He came out and worked on that case for I don't know how long but they never could pinpoint these people. They were suspected but they just couldn't, you know, do it. I think then one of the boys who was connected with it--the father and the son did this to him, then the boy was taken ill and in the hospital and I think they told me, on his dying day he said that he did it.

M: He did it.

P: Um hm. (hardly audible)

M: Wow. (in hushed tone)

P: (laughs nervously, probably with relief) That's the story of my father.

M: What happened to your mother then?

P: Then my mother came back to Honolulu and she was a devout

Christian Scientist and she lived at the Blaisdell Hotel until she passed away there in 1938. (this last line and the short sentence that follows are almost inaudible and difficult to transcribe)

M: Let me check and see if I'm picking you up. Your voice. . . (recorder is turned off and on again) Now I want to go back and ask you a couple of things. Where were you born?

P: (both voices much more audible now and the background noise of a waterfall or a river is decreased) I was born in Waimea, Kaua'i.

M: Waimea. Is that near Koloa?

P: No, no. It's near Mana, Kekaha.

M: Oh. What were you doing over there? Or what were your parents?

P: My father was with Mr. H. T. Sion, oldtime family of Kaua'i, and he and my father had a ranch. No, it was a dairy. A dairy and they had dairy cattle. And then my father became manager of the Waimea Plantation. That's why we were there in Waimea. I was born in that old plantation home.

M: How old were your parents when you were born, about?

P: I don't know. (whispered) (Lynda chuckles)

M: I just was wondering. Okay. I wanted to ask you, why did your father leave Parker?

P: Parker Ranch?

M: Um hm. (long pause) That was a tremendous job.

P: It was a big job. Well, we were there six years. And then, I don't know, Mr. A. W. Carter was in charge of Thelma Smart's property. He was a trustee of her estate and it was through him that my father was put into this job. He was a very hard man to get along with, Mr. Carter was. (chuckles) So whether my father was asked to leave, that I don't know.

M: Um hm. Anyway, they came back down here.

P: Then they came here to Honolulu. He retired then and lived, as I told you, at the Donna Hotel. Uh huh.

M: Where did you go to school?

P: Well, I went to several schools.

M: You must have.

P: I went to government school when I was a little girl.

M: Government?

P: Government school: public school. And then my father put me into St. Andrew's Priory when it was not what it is now. It was run by the sisters-- English sisters--and I was there, oh, about five years, I guess.

M: How many students did they have then?

P: Oh, I don't remember. Couldn't have been more than ninety, all boarders. They were all boarders.

M: At the same location that they are now.

P: Yes, same location. Of course, it's really renovated. It's beautiful now but it wasn't in my day. I recall that we used to have tin plates and tin cups. (laughter) That's what they used to serve our food in, and the food was very bad. However, my father wasn't pleased with our staying at that school so he decided to put us in Punahou [School], so we went to Punahou for several years.

M: Oh. Is that where you graduated?

P: I didn't graduate. I was taken very, very ill and I was taken out of school and I had this very serious operation and I never did go back, but I finished my high school education in Kona at a private school and I got my certificate there. I didn't really graduate from Punahou. I was in the Class of 1914.

M: Do you have surviving brothers and sisters here?

P: I had six brothers and one sister but just two are left. My sister is Mrs. [Linzy Clark] Child that lives in Kona. [nee Lena Kaualani Conant]

M: Child?

P: Child. Her husband is related to the Childs that own the hotels, you know.

M: No.

P: You know the InterIsland Resorts [Ltd.] owned by the Child family. The Walter Childs. Well, that's my brother-in-law's cousin.

M: Oh. Okay. And who is the other? Your brother that's surviving.

P: Oh, Fred [B.] Conant, [Jr.] and Raymond [Kaweilipoilani] Conant. These are my surviving brothers. (long pause)

M: Your father was Scotch.

P: No, he was a Yankee. My husband was Scotch. (chuckles)

M: Oh, I see. That's where you got your accent. (laughter)

P: No, my father was a Yankee. (long pause)

M: Okay, I think I've got that all straight. (long pause)
Okay, now can we start up--you finished, then, at Kona and then what?

P: You mean my folks?

M: No, your own life.

P: Oh, then I was to teach school for awhile. I went to the Normal School for awhile and I did get a certificate. I got a certificate but not--I couldn't teach in the higher grades but I was able to teach in the grammar grades, so I taught the third grade for two years in Kona and we got the big salary of forty dollars a month and it was paid to us in gold. (laughter)

M: Oh, forty dollars a month.

P: Forty dollars a month.

M: Well, did you have board and room?

P: I lived at home, so Father and Mother didn't make me pay board. Then I became engaged when I was eighteen years old and I was married when I was twenty-one.

M: And who was your husband now?

P: Alexander James Porter.

M: Where did he come from?

P: He came from Liverpool, England.

M: That was his home?

P: That was his home.

M: And what brought him out to Hawai'i?

P: He was on his way to Singapore, thinking he'd get a job there. He stopped off in Honolulu and he happened to know a Mr. Wakefield of Theo. H. Davies and Company and so Mr. Wakefield persuaded my husband to stay in Honolulu and he would give him a job at Davies, which he did, and he worked for Davies and Company for forty-two years.

M: Oh, his whole career then was right here.

P: No, he was sent to New York for awhile. We were in New York for two years. He was the assistant manager of the New York office and then we came back to Hilo and he was made manager of the Hilo branch and we lived in Hilo for forty years. Um hm. I have sort of a varied life, haven't I? (chuckles)

M: Yeh, you certainly have. And what about your children?

P: I have two children. They're eleven years apart. I have a daughter, Lowry [Porter] MacKenzie and I have a son, Donald [Porter], that lives in Kailua.

M: Lowry MacKenzie. Is it M-A-C or M-C?

P: M-A-C, yes.

M: Is that two words, though?

P: M-A-C-K-E-N-Z-I-E. Her name is not Laurie; not L-A-U, it's L-O-W-R-Y. Lowry.

M: Where did you get that name?

P: Her grandmother, on my husband's side, Margaret Lowry. And they're no relation to the Lowrys in Hawai'i.

M: Can you recall things that happened--stories that happened maybe in connection with your husband's work or involving people here or whatever?

P: Well, we lived in Honolulu. We owned a home out at Beach Walk--a cute house--and he was offered this job in New York, so we hurriedly sold that beautiful home and I think of it and all--half of my wedding presents went with it. And we went over to New York in the dead of winter in 1919.

As I say, we lived in New Jersey. He commuted every day over to New York. And my first child was born there in New Jersey and then we came back to Hawai'i and he was made manager of the Hilo branch of Davies and Company and we lived there, as I told you, for forty years. And then eleven years later, I had the boy (chuckles).

M: Wow. (chuckles also)

P: And there, they're the grandchildren. That's my husband in the middle and the two grandsons and that one up there. (chuckles) (evidently referring to a photograph)

M: That's your husband?

P: My husband in the middle. (recorder is turned off and on again)

M: . . . more about what your husband did in Hilo; your experiences in Hilo.

P: Well, my husband was, I'd say, a very smart man and he was vice president of so many of those outfits in Hilo. He was president of the [Hilo] Gas Company; president of the Hilo Electric Light [Company] and he was a very devoted Mason. He never became a master but he was very instrumental in lots of things in Masonic work.

M: What did you do?

P: Well, I belonged to the Women's Club and the Y.W.C.A. and I did a lot of church work. I belong to the Episcopal Church.

M: Well, can you recall any stories about your experiences in these?

P: I don't know what you mean by stories.

M: Well, you know, human interest kind of stories about the people that you knew or, you know, startling things that happened, if any.

P: Well of course I went through two tidal waves.

M: Yeh, can you tell me about that?

P: Well, the first one, he was still in business when the first tidal wave in 1943 took place and it wiped out all the warehouses with all the merchandise.

M: The Davies' warehouses.

P: Yes. And I had a beautiful table that I used for special occasions--it would seat twelve people--and I had it stored in this warehouse and that washed out to sea. (chuckles) And I had a beautiful banquet cloth that went with it and I never could use it anymore. We had no table to use it with. (laughter)

Well, in the second tidal wave that was in 1960. . . of course our home was way up on the hill. We were far away from any destruction, so we were saved from both tidal waves. The second one came from a different direction so the other half of Hilo was destroyed. The first one came from the Aleutian Islands and the second one came from Chile. They came from two directions and one hit one part of Hilo and the other one hit the other half, so Hilo was really just about destroyed from both ends.

And we've had many earthquakes in Hilo. I've had many of my beautiful dishes broken by falling down. I'd come home from a trip, maybe, and find all my lovely dishes all over the floor. (laughter)

M: Another thing I wanted to ask was, can you tell me more about your husband's background?

P: Well, his father was a detective in the Liverpool police department, as I recall. I never did meet either one of them. The mother had died when he, my husband, was quite a young man so I never did meet my mother-in-law. I never met my father-in-law because he died before I got to England. My husband hadn't been back to England for twenty-eight years. In 1938, we decided that he was going to take a trip and the little boy was only seven years old--six years old--and the daughter was seventeen, so we decided that we'd take a trip around the world, all by ship. We went by way of Australia and the way around that way. And so I never really did meet my husband's people, except his sister. I met his sister. They're very lovely people. But my husband was a very aggressive man. Although he had to work hard in his early life, he didn't have anything in the way of worldly goods, and he was determined to have an education, so he used to work during the day and go to school at night.

M: Where did he go to school?

P: I don't remember. He wouldn't tell me. Some night school there in Liverpool, I don't remember where. Some kind of a night school. But he loved to read and he had a very retentive memory. He was a very clever man, my husband was, and that's how he got his education. I think that's how he

got promoted to all these different things, because he had such a nice. . .you know, rounded out. He had a nice personality; everybody liked him. But he was aggressive, as I told you, and his word was law. (chuckles) He knew what he wanted. We had a very happy life.

I married him, as I told you, when I was very young and I never had to work. He took care of me all those years and he left me very well-off financially, so I don't have anything to worry about. (chuckles)

M: That's marvelous.

P: It is marvelous. I've had a beautiful life, when I think about it. When I look around here and see what some of these ladies have to put up with, um hm, I'm very fortunate and grateful.

M: What year were you married then?

P: 1916.

M: And your husband was how old when you married him?

P: I was about twenty-one and he was twenty-five.

M: You were eighteen.

P: No, twenty-one. I was twenty-one; he was twenty-six.

M: Oh, I see, you said you were eighteen when you met him, or when you became engaged, or what?

P: Engaged but we had a long engagement because I was still teaching. (chuckles) I didn't want to get married then, so. My mother thought I was rather young to get married at that early age, so we waited until I was twenty-one and we were married here in old St. Clement's Church. They have since torn that one down. They built a new one.

M: You were teaching in Kona and your husband was working where?

P: In Honolulu, uh huh, and he used to come up on his vacations to visit us at our home.

M: And that's the only time you saw him.

P: Yes, the only time I saw him, except if I came down for my long holidays, you know. School holidays. And that's the only time I saw him. I don't believe in long engagements, though, do you?

M: No.

P: And still, you know, my two children. . .both of them eloped.

M: Oh really.

P: Um hm. My daughter was married twice. This is her second husband. Of course they've been married thirty years, you know. That's when they looked very young and beautiful. (evidently referring to a photograph)

M: Uh huh. Is this your son?

P: Yes, when he graduated from college, and yet he doesn't look like that now. He had a crew cut.

M: He looks very much like your husband in that picture.

P: Yes. And you know, even the grandson looks like him, um hm.

M: Really a strong resemblance, isn't there? For a minute I thought it was your husband.

P: But I took that picture of him because he has big ears and now he has such pretty hair and he's let it grow kind of long. There's another one that you might like better. That's he and his family over there. 'Course that's taken quite--the family have grown up since, but I like his hair better there.

M: (from across the room) Gee, you have a lovely family.

P: Well, I will say I only had two children but I have seven grandchildren. (laughter) No great-grandchildren yet, but Jimmy, the oldest one, is not about to get married. He wants to see his career in the army finished. He's already graduated from college; he has his degree, but then he is in the army and they say he's a lieutenant in a helicopter corps, or whatever you call it, and that's where he's going. It's pitiful, isn't it?

M: Yes, it is. It really is. You've got some beautiful furniture and things. My gosh.

P: I tell you, I had a beautiful home in Hilo. I have a lovely picture of it from the air. You want to see it?

M: Yes, I'd love to. (recorder is turned off and on again) Tell me about your trips.

P: Yes, well, my husband, as I say, was very fond of travel, so in 1938 we took that trip around the world with the children. Then he retired and 1955, he and I went to Europe. First we went to visit his sister in England, then we went abroad and we traveled all over Europe. We had a car and a driver. He was our interpreter. It's very hard to go from country to country without knowing the language and the changing of the money, so we took this Spanish man and he was a good driver and we took him all over with us. And that was in '55. Then we came . . .

END OF INTERVIEW

Transcribed and edited by Katherine B. Allen

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THE WATUMULL FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

In May 1971, the Watumull Foundation initiated an Oral History Project.

The project was formally begun on June 24, 1971 when Katherine B. Allen was selected to interview kamaainas and longtime residents of Hawaii in order to preserve their experiences and knowledge. In July, Lynda Mair joined the staff as an interviewer.

During the next seventeen months, eighty-eight persons were interviewed. Most of these taped oral histories were transcribed by November 30, 1972.

Then the project was suspended indefinitely due to the retirement of the foundation's chairman, Ellen Jensen Watumull.

In February 1979, the project was reactivated and Miss Allen was recalled as director and editor.

Three sets of the final transcripts, typed on acid-free Permalife Bond paper, have been deposited respectively in the Archives of Hawaii, the Hamilton Library at the University of Hawaii, and the Cooke Library at Punahou School.